

NORTH AMERICAN

WETLANDS

CONSERVATION ACT

project flash

Puerto Rico Partnership Receives \$50,000 for Wetlands Project

On June 9, 2004, the North American Wetlands Conservation Council reported to the Migratory Bird Conservation Commission that it had approved **\$50,000** in funding under the North American Wetlands Conservation Act's Small Grants Program for the **Restoration of the Lajas Valley Project** in **Puerto Rico's Lajas and Cabo Rojo Municipalities**. The Act is nonregulatory and calls for voluntary partnerships to develop and implement wetlands and associated uplands conservation projects to benefit wildlife. Projects must meet certain biological criteria to be considered for funding, and partners must be able to match the grant request 1:1 with nonfederal funds.

In this the first of a four-phase project, partners will use their grant and **\$183,500** in matching funds, and \$170,400 in U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) nonmatching funds, to restore a 350-acre wetland at the Laguna Cartagena National Wildlife Refuge. Fifty years ago, the construction of an irrigation drainage canal increased and stabilized water levels in the wetland, allowing cattails to overgrow an area that once had supported over 20,000 wintering waterfowl and 100,000 migrating shorebirds. Project goals are to remove cattails and manage their growth, construct dikes and canals, and install water-control structures to simulate the wetland's natural cycle of flooding and drawdown. The Service has already designed and implemented a comprehensive monitoring program to track the effects of restoration on various important ecological and environmental components. The University of Puerto Rico-Mayagüez (University) will provide personnel, equipment, and supplies to monitor the effects on water quality and plants. Volunteers will reforest adjacent refuge uplands with native species.

Historical data from Laguna Cartagena show significant numbers of wintering waterfowl, including over 6,000 American wigeons, 2,500 lesser scaup, and over 13,000 blue-winged teal. Resident nesting species also were abundant: 3,400 ruddy ducks, 3,000 Caribbean coots, and more than 100 white-cheeked pintails. Although the lagoon supports few waterfowl under current conditions, initial restoration activities have generated increases in other wildlife abundance. In addition to waterfowl, the lagoon is used by resident and **Atlantic Flyway** migratory shorebirds and wading birds. Also, the refuge includes critical habitat for the federally listed yellow-shouldered blackbird. Reduced cattail cover and a mosaic of vegetation types will improve both foraging and nesting habitat for this endangered bird.

The Service, the University, Puerto Rico Electric Power Authority, and Parrilla Hydrologic Consulting are working together to achieve their project's goals. Their work also helps to advance the habitat conservation goals of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan's **Atlantic Coast Joint Venture**, the Puerto Rico and U.S. Virgin Islands Bird Conservation Plan, and the Southeastern Coastal Plains-Caribbean Regional Shorebird Plan. Perhaps most importantly, it fulfills a U.S. Congressional mandate that

DIVISION OF BIRD HABITAT
CONSERVATION
NORTH AMERICAN WETLANDS
CONSERVATION COUNCIL
4401 NORTH FAIRFAX DRIVE
MAIL STOP 4075
ARLINGTON, VA 22203
birdhabitat.fws.gov • 703/358-1784



the Service restore Laguna Cartagena as a condition of the long-term lease the Service received for 816 acres of wetlands and associated uplands from the Puerto Rico Land Administration in 1989.

For more information about this project, contact Stephen Earsom, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, stephen_earsom@fws.gov, (787) 851-7258 extension 36, or Keith Morehouse, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, keith_morehouse@fws.gov, (703) 358-1784.